

Thank you for inviting me to speak this afternoon.

My name is Kathleen Mundell and I am the Director of Cultural Resources, a non-profit based in Maine, that for the last 25 years has worked with local communities on developing strategies, alliances and programs that help sustain their traditional culture.

What are traditional arts?

Franco-American step dancing, Wabanaki basket-making, Rwandan drumming, every community has cultural traditions worth preserving. These traditions are passed down informally, usually face to face, from elder to youth, and are rooted in a way of living, reflecting shared cultural values.

Drawing on a complex set of skills acquired over a lifetime of practice, traditional artists are recognized by fellow community members as the ones who are “doing it right.’

Such mastery calls for a deep understanding of natural materials, place and cultural practices.

Where there is a long-standing sense of place, people know what works and what doesn’t, what is useful and even beautiful. And some people who have lived in an area for a long time, although often reluctant to take on the term of “expert” or even “artist’, can be the keepers of this culture. What Barry Lopez describes as “local geniuses.” He explains: “Their knowledge is intimate rather than encyclopedic, human not necessarily scholarly. It rings with the concrete details of experience.”

How does Cultural Resources work with artists and communities on conserving their cultural heritage?

We do this through fieldwork and organizing community gatherings resulting in the development of a range of programs from apprenticeship programs to travelling exhibits.

Our longest working relationship is with Wabanaki traditional artists (members of the Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Micmac and Maliseet tribes). With support from the National Endowment for the Arts, Folk and Traditional Arts Program, Cultural Resources worked with the Maine Arts Commission in developing a highly successful apprenticeship program that contributed to the resurgence of the ash basketry tradition and help create a new generation of basket makers, many of whom have gone onto national recognition including 4 National Heritage winners, 3 USA artists fellowship winners and many first-place winners at the Santa Fe Indian Market. This work was also instrumental in the formation of the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, a native run nonprofit dedicated to conserving this endangered tradition. More than just one on one instruction, apprenticeships, help communities maintain their cultural traditions, connecting experienced artists with younger students for an exchange of techniques and cultural knowledge, which often includes language instruction and the preparation and selection of natural materials.

Being able to rely on one's own talents and utilize nearby natural resources has great resonance in Maine and especially the North Woods. This part of Maine is America's oldest working woodlands, and it is home to a remarkable range of traditional artists. Whether shaping snowshoes or building birch bark canoes, these artists are keeping alive an important part of this region's heritage. Given the harsh climate and limited economic opportunities, to be a practicing traditional artist in this region requires a strong sense of purpose, resourcefulness, and ingenuity. One of Cultural Resource's touring exhibitions, "Artists of the Forest," is a tribute to their creativity and dedication.

Many traditional art forms continue because they fit into a self-sufficient lifestyle that is an essential part of living in Maine. Such practices continue because their makers choose to keep

them going—adapting them to fit contemporary circumstances and new markets, while at the same time, affording them the freedom to live and work in a place they love.

What is COVID's impact?

The apprenticeship program and the traveling exhibit program are at the core of our mission.

Last year, just as 8 new apprenticeships were about to begin, everything came to a halt when Governor Janet Mills issued a stay-at-home order. As a result, many of the apprenticeships were postponed as well as a new exhibit entitled “Always Home: Wabanaki Traditional Arts” which was to open at Monson Arts, in northern Maine. With Cares Act funding, Cultural Resources will be able to move forward with the apprenticeships and open the exhibit at the end of May, 2021.

This past year, has been one of tremendous loss — of lives, of jobs, and of human connection.

We have also seen the extraordinary capacity of the human spirit to find ways to keep going. I believe supporting traditional arts helps people through such dark times by honoring people, their places and their cultural practices

It is through the work of this committee and the National Endowment for the Arts that such programs are able to continue.

Thank you so very much for what you do and for your support.

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